Is This How It Works in the

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Cockpit photo by PH2 Matthew Thomas
Photo-Composite by Allan Amen

the Fleet?

The plan seemed logical: Fly all six of the squadron's SH-3s to NAS Norfolk, where they would be staged for the upcoming deployment. The ship was scheduled to deploy in one week, only two days after Christmas. The thought of doing turn-around inspections and flight planning on Christmas Day, not to mention a six-hour helicopter flight with Christmas dinner still in our bellies, had prompted the skipper's plan to preposition the squadron's aircraft and equipment. All we had to do was fly the helicopters up the East Coast and return the same day on a C-9.

Two days before this flight, I had flown my FRS NATOPS check. The day after that, I'd traded the golden bars of an ensign for the equally salt-free silver bars of a lieutenant (junior grade). Twelve hours before the flight, I had arrived on the quarterdeck of my first fleet squadron to discover a flurry of activity. No one had much time to talk to a confused-looking new guy, but I did manage to ascertain that I should return at 0500 to brief for a flight to Norfolk. That seemed well within my powers.

I was to be the copilot in Dash 6. My HAC, whom I hadn't met, was a senior lieutenant on his second fleet tour. The flight was planned as a VFR, six-helicopter formation flight, with one fuel stop. My first hint that this plan would change came from the AG who came to brief us about the weather en route. The entire East Coast was a mess: multiple overcast layers, rain showers, and even a few thunderstorms. It was obvious we would not be able to get on top of this goo, because most helicopters have a ceiling of around 10,000 feet, and no one wanted to spend six hours flying through it. Therefore, the skipper decided we would use the time-honored helicopter tactic of flying as low as allowed by law, until forced by weather to come up with another plan.

The first leg was bumpy and tiresome, but we managed to stay in a reasonable facsimile of a formation. Approaching our first fuel stop, the

weather was getting worse. While the aircraft were being refueled, the skipper decided that we would break up and file six individual IFR flight plans. This wise decision forced my HAC to share with the flight lead a piece of information we had kept to ourselves: Our aircraft had no operable navigation devices. The TACAN, ADF and even the Doppler had all died en route! We decided that Dash 5 and Dash 6 would file as an IFR formation flight.

The next two hours would constitute the scariest flight of my short aviation career. Within minutes of takeoff, we were between overcast layers, dodging clouds, and flying a very tight formation to avoid losing sight of our lead. Before long, we were not between clouds, we were in them. I sat in petrified silence, as my aircraft commander inched our helicopter closer and closer to the lead. As the clouds got thicker, the lead became harder and harder to see. Despite the fact that we were separated by only one rotor diameter, the aircraft in front of us disappeared several times for a moment or two, and the lead reappeared before we had time to react. On one occasion, we thought we had lost them for good. My HAC yanked back on the cyclic and slowed our airspeed, but when the lead reappeared 30 seconds later, we charged back into our little formation.

I sat in petrified silence, as my aircraft commander inched our helicopter closer and closer to the lead.

At some point, my HAC said, "I have no intention of spending Christmas in Mayberry, North Carolina," or words to that effect. His chief concern was that if we broke off from the lead and asked for separate IFR handling, the controller might ask us to navigate on a vector airway defined by a TACAN radial, especially since that was the route for which our flight had filed. Then we'd have to admit to ATC that we had no operable navigation devices, and then they might vector us to the nearest VMC airfield.

That's when the light came on in my head: This was not the way all flights were conducted in the fleet. This was, instead, the result of a bad decision. We were going to stay in this precarious formation no matter what else happened.

Visibility continued to decrease, and we continued to close what little distance remained between our main rotor and the lead's tail rotor. From this distance, I could easily make out a look of concern on the face of the squadron ops officer, who was sitting in the copilot seat of the lead aircraft. Every minute or two, he would turn around and stare at us, as if to say, "Please be careful with my tail rotor."

I believe we were at about half-a-rotor diameter when the lead finally disappeared for good. At the beginning of any inadvertent IMC dispersal, there's a moment of hesitation, as you stare into the goo and wonder, "Are they coming back?" At half-a-rotor diameter, this moment seemed to last forever. As the remainder of my seat cushion disappeared, my HAC aggressively pulled back on the cyclic. This time we even executed a turn. Soon we were flying around blindly in a cloud. As my HAC tried to contact ATC and explain our situation, he spotted a sucker hole leading to terra firma. After a lengthy corkscrew descent, we found ourselves at about 300 feet, over a farmer's field, still negotiating with ATC.

Strangely, I can't remember anything about the rest of the flight. I do know that during all the excitement, I had said absolutely nothing. In fact, that was my total contribution to the flight. I was the brand new pilot, fresh from the FRS. Whether implied or inferred, my role in the crew was to be quiet and learn how things were done in the fleet. Unfortunately, that is exactly what I did. Deep down, I knew it was my responsibility to tell the HAC that I was uncomfortable with his actions. Aircrew coordination training was not yet the comprehensive program that it is today. Nonetheless, I'm certain that someone in the training command had told me that "rank doesn't exist in the cockpit," and that a junior copilot should not be afraid to disagree with a seasoned aircraft commander. The HAC didn't ask my opinion during this flight, but I had no reason to believe he would ignore it. I should have spoken up, but instead, I sat on my hands. Fortunately, my first flight in the fleet did not become my last.

LCdr. Rodeman flies with HS-14, and was the safety officer when he wrote this article.